

May 2014

Onalie

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Recommended Citation

Finn, Michael; Long, Brittany; Zabel, Liz; and Ariyabandhu, Onalie (2014) "Onalie," *Ethos*: Vol. 2014 , Article 13.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2014/iss3/13>

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It was just like any other family vacation...Until a massive tsunami hit, and suddenly a girl and her family were fighting for their lives.

BY **MICHAEL FINN**
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PHOTO **LIZ ZABEL**
AND **COURTESY OF ONALIE ARIYABANDHU**

Nine years ago, Onalie Ariyabandhu and her whole family were all happily gathered under one roof, laughing and playing and eating good food with each other.

It was December 25, 2004. They were celebrating Almsgiving, a Buddhist tradition in which respect is given to monks by offering food and gifts.

This was one of the few times a year when Onalie's extended family, with whom she is very close, get to enjoy each other's company. Her Aunt Lilani and her two sons, Lahiru and Lasith, flew in to Sri Lanka from England to visit for a few days.

It is an essential Ariyabandhu family tradition. Every year, Onalie's father, Dilip, hosts the celebration at his horticultural lab facility, which he owns and operates. The celebration is always a huge undertaking. There were many mouths to feed and a whole lot of entertaining to do, with all of Dilip's employees joining the celebration. Loads of school supplies were given to the children of the employees, too. That was what the celebration was all about—charity, generosity and selflessness, something the Ariyabandhu family is known for.

After the celebration, after all the gifts had been exchanged and all the food had been eaten, Onalie and her family headed back to their home in a cozy suburban village just outside the hustle and bustle of Sri Lanka's main port city, Colombo. They were exhausted and ready for bed. They needed their sleep. Early tomorrow morning, Onalie's family, along with the family of Dilip's close friend, Zoysa, would hop into a big white taxi van and hit the road for the temple of Kataragama, a pilgrimage they make every year. The plan was to worship at the temple for two days and then return. A short-lived vacation, but a sweet one. It was something they always looked forward to and always enjoyed.



“ Just don’t breathe underwater, darling. Don’t worry, darling. Nothing is going to happen. ”

The drive to Kataragama was about five hours long. But that was the scenic route. They took that way because one of their oldest living family members, Onalie’s great-grand aunt, was along the way. Taking the landlocked route would have cut straight through to Kataragama and shaved nearly two hours off the drive. They opted for the coastline instead.

It was an abnormally beautiful day, with blue skies and no rain. It was the rainy season in Sri Lanka—normally, it would be raining and the ocean would be heaving and thrashing violently. But not today. Today was a beautiful day. It was a perfect day to visit the temple.

Halfway there, they stopped at a grocery store in a little coastal village called Galle. Dilip, Zoysa and his family, Aunt Lilani and younger cousin Lasith, all jumped out of the van and went to grab some food and gifts for their great-grand aunt, who wasn’t far down the road.

The driver of the taxi van was out and about, checking out the local shops and kiosks.

Onalie, her mother Susie, her little sister Chavini and older cousin Lahiru, all stayed in the van. Onalie and her sister joked and messed around with Lahiru, just passing the time while they waited for everyone to get back. They were still groggy and exhausted from Almsgiving the night before and didn’t feel like going in the grocery store.

And then suddenly the fun was over. The driver came sprinting back to the van, out of breath and completely terrified.

“There is sea water coming in to the land! There is sea water coming in to the land!” he yelled frantically.

Onalie was confused. “OK...so what?” she thought. Everyone in the van looked at each other. They didn’t know what to think.

All around them, people were running from something. Masses of pedestrians were rushing away in the same direction, away from the coastline...Something terrible was coming.

The driver floored the van and sped away from the coastline.

Within seconds, an enormous wall of filthy brown water slammed into the van with the force of a runaway train. Onalie and her family were trapped.

“Are we going to die? Are we going to die?” Chavini asked her mother.

“No, darling. We are not going to die. Just don’t breathe underwater. Don’t worry, darling. Nothing is going to happen.”

Water began to fill the van. It poured through the dashboard air conditioning vents. It seeped through the floors and doors.

The van began to submerge. First the water filled at Onalie’s ankles. Then her knees. Her thighs. Her waist. Her chest. Her neck.

She kicked the passenger-side window, trying to break free. She kept on kicking and kicking until the window finally shattered. The water rose to her chin. She took her last breath, closed her eyes, and went under.

Just don’t breathe underwater, darling. Don’t worry, darling. Nothing is going to happen.

She surfaced just outside the van. The first thing she saw was her mother, no more than ten yards away, being thrashed and swept away by the roaring current. Her mother’s hair was messy and her face was limp. Onalie thought she looked dead.

She kept calm, but still couldn’t believe what was happening. She shut her eyes as tight as she could and opened them again to see if she was just dreaming. This was no dream...she really was being washed away in a tsunami wave, her mother really could be dead, she really didn’t know where her sister or cousin or anyone else was.

The current pushed her toward a tall light post. She stretched out and reached for it, but barely missed. She continued to barrel downstream, toward the edge of a canal lined with small trees. She caught the trunk of a tree and held on for her life.

There was a faint voice amid the roar of the water. It was her older cousin Lahiru, perched atop a nearby tree. Chavini was clinging to the trunk of the same tree.

“What the hell are you doing! Get to the top of the tree!” Lahiru shouted.

Using the seat of a bicycle lodged to the base of a tree, she stood up and threw her leg over the branch and hoisted herself to the top.

Here she had a new vantage point of the devastation. She could see beds and cars and corpses surging past her. A young girl atop a Jeep floated past her, screaming and crying for help. There was nothing Onalie could do but hope and pray.

After a few minutes, water levels began to subside, and people began to jump into the water to save others. One boy, who was carrying a dead body over his shoulder, came to Onalie and helped her and Lahiru and Chavini get to a nearby bridge that joined the lowland to the highland, where they would be safe.

The bridge was littered with dead bodies. Lahiru and Chavini were taken to a nearby church, a refuge for the survivors. Onalie stayed behind on the bridge and looked desperately for her mother.

Onalie saw two people walk by her dragging a dead body that she swore looked just like her mother: long dark hair, fair skin, blue and bloated from drowning.

An elderly man and a Buddhist monk approached Onalie.

“Do you want to come see if your mom is here?” the monk asked as he pointed his finger at the stack of corpses neatly lining the bridge.

She said no. She didn’t want to see her mother dead. She refused to believe she was dead.

Someone said that another wave could be coming, and everyone scattered from the bridge. Onalie ran across the bridge and made for the highlands. A boy ran to her and asked what her name was and who she was missing. Onalie gave him a description of her



Onalie with the tree she held onto to save her life from the tsunami

mother, and then without another word, the boy ran away. He ran all the way to Onalie's mother, who was doctoring survivors in a torn-up building that used to be the post office.

"Do you know a girl named Sonalie?" the boy said.

Susie knew he meant Onalie.

The boy ran back to Onalie and told her he had found her mother. The two ran back to the post office as fast as they could.

When Onalie and her mother saw each other, their faces appeared drained and lifeless. They were happy to see each other again, but they were too mentally and physically exhausted to express emotion. Both were in shock and unable to fully understand the tragedy they had just gone through.

A family offered the pair refuge in their little house. Susie left Onalie in the house and went on her way to rescue the rest of her family.

For the next few hours, Susie scoured the ruins of the little coastal town, looking for Chavini and Lahiru. Susie walked up and down the road barefoot, stepping over the mangled and waterlogged debris that was once the town of Galle. She found them in a church nearby and sent them to the house to reunite with Onalie.

Susie then went back to the grocery store, where she found Lilani, Lasith, Zoysa and Zoysa's family. Dilip was nowhere to be found.

Dilip saw everything. He saw the water surge in from the coastline. He saw the water engulf the van. He watched helplessly, from the safety of the grocery store, as his entire family was washed away before his eyes.

He thought he was witnessing the death of his entire family. It devastated him.

"That was the worst moment of my life. It all happened so fast," Dilip said. "One cannot comprehend how something like that can happen. One moment it was a beautiful day, the next you look out of the window and see this mass of water just washing away everything you could see."

He wasn't going to sit there and watch his family die, so he took off his glasses, gave his wallet and cell phone to Lilani, and jumped into the raging water.

Dilip woke up in a hospital. The sole of his foot was sliced open and his chin was badly scraped. He fainted as he was being thrashed around in the water, and was later found by a search party. They thought he was dead, so they put him in a cart with the other dead bodies and brought him to the hospital.

When he awoke in the hospital, he saw a young girl being wheeled past him on a stretcher. She looked just like Onalie—she wore a gold chain around her neck, the same gold chain that Onalie always wears when she is back home in Sri Lanka. The girl on the stretcher appeared to be dead.

That's all it took for Dilip to convince himself that his entire family was gone. He knew Onalie was the tough one of the family—if she wasn't alive, then no one was.

A doctor found Dilip and discovered that his entire family was supposedly dead. Thinking Dilip might commit suicide, he put him up in his nearby apartment for the night, where the doctor's mother-in-law cared for him.

Aunt Lilani, who was with Dilip in the grocery store, had Dilip's cell phone. Dilip used the doctor's cell phone to call his own phone, in hopes of finding someone who was still alive.

Susie answered the phone.

"We are OK, Dilip. We are alive," she said.

Dilip did not believe it.

Onalie took the phone from her mother.

"Thaththi! [Sinhalese for daddy], Thaththi! It's me, I'm here, don't worry, don't cry. This is Akki [Sinhalese for older sister]."

At the sound of Onalie's voice, Dilip burst into tears. He cried like he'd never cried before.

"Patiya? [Sinhalese for baby animal] Patiya? Patiya?" Dilip screeched.

That night, Dilip stayed in the doctor's office and the rest of the family stayed in the little house back in Galle. The military trucks, which would be bringing them to the hospital, weren't arriving until early the next morning.

That was the only night Onalie had nightmares of the tsunami. She tossed and turned as she remembered nearly drowning in the van. She remembered the water filling up at her ankles. She remembered taking her last breath as her mouth touched the roof of the van.

The military trucks arrived in the morning and brought them all to the hospital, where they were finally reunited. Onalie embraced her father and they cried together. They all embraced.

The tsunami ended up taking the lives of 35,222 Sri Lankans that day. Onalie and her family were thankful to be among the survivors. 